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CONTACT: Colleen Kroll (202) 225-5235

THE STATE OF OUR UNION

"This week, President Bush delivered his annual State of the Union Address. Traditionally, the President uses this opportunity to discuss the current conditions in our nation and to propose new ideas for how to make this a stronger, more successful country. We know that the state of our union is strong, but we must always work to be stronger. There are many important issues facing our nation, and we in Congress must work together with the President to create the best policies and to represent the American people more effectively. The following are my thoughts on the issues we face and the goals we need to accomplish together.

"First and foremost, national security is our highest priority. Our government's most important job is to ensure that our nation and its people are safe and secure. I support the President and his advisors, but I believe certain steps need to be taken as we continue the foreign policies this Administration has set in place. First, we must secure the resources necessary to defend the United States from terrorist attacks. Second, our men and women in uniform must have the tools necessary to get a self-governing Iraq up and running as quickly as possible and to continue the efforts to stabilize Afghanistan. Finally, and most importantly, we must continue to work with our allies to identify and eliminate terrorist organizations before they attack the United States or our allies.

"We must also establish economic policies that encourage economic growth without creating long term structural deficits. We have been in a largely jobless recovery. The Dow is over 10,000 and we have had several consecutive quarters of economic growth. However, the unemployment rate is still 5.7% and the economy is not creating jobs. This is not acceptable and needs our attention, now and always. As we did in 1997, it is time to once again develop a plan that will get the budget back into balance in the long term. As a government we must identify our national priorities, determine the appropriate funding levels or tax policies to implement those priorities, and ensure that we have sufficient revenue coming into the federal government to meet our national needs. There are many priorities that will need proper funding this year, but we must ask the question, "who will pay for them?" It is not acceptable for us to pass our massive debt on to our children and grandchildren.

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"Outside of national security and the economy, I believe we have three major problems to address this year. First, we must keep the promises we made to Veterans. We made a good first step with TRICARE for Life, and I will continue to fight to ensure the VA has the resources necessary to provide the medical care that we promised to our Veterans. We must also address the issue of Concurrent Receipt. Military retirees are the only federal employees penalized for having a service connected disability. I have been fighting to eliminate this unfair treatment for

years. We are about half way there now, but I hope we can provide relief for all veterans this year.

“Secondly, quality education is the backbone of our society. Our children are the future of our nation, and it is of the utmost importance to provide them with the best possible educational opportunities. Fully funding the No Child Left Behind bill is the first step in providing quality education. Significant new standards have been placed on our schools, teachers, and students and it will take the proper funding to meet these new requirements. I voted for this bill with the belief that the President would make sure the promised funding was included in his budget. So far, this funding has not been provided. Additionally, college education needs to be affordable for American families. Congress needs to ensure that Pell grants, student loans, and the Montgomery GI bill reflect the growing cost of going to college. One of the key foundations of our economic success is that each generation is better educated than the preceding one. We must work together to see that our children and grandchildren have the educational opportunities to continue this trend.

“Finally, providing affordable and accessible healthcare is crucial, particularly in our rural communities. Congress just passed a major overhaul of Medicare, that needs to be monitored carefully. This year seniors will receive a prescription drug card that should save them between 15% and 25% on the cost of prescription drugs. The full drug benefit will not be in place until 2006, and we must deliver the services which were promised to seniors. We also need to make health insurance available to the tens of millions of Americans who do not have it and more affordable for those that do. We spend almost twice as much per person on health care delivery than any other country in the world, yet our life expectancy is shorter than countries that spend half as much. Roughly 40 million Americans do not have health insurance. I want to work with the President to develop cost effective ways to provide healthcare for those who do not have it and to lower health insurance costs for individuals and businesses to help us remain competitive in the world economy.

“In closing, it is important to have the opportunity to express competing ideas and policies. Debates and discussions lead to the compromises and solutions that are vital to developing a more successful, secure, and sound nation. It is my hope that, in the coming year, Congress and the President can work together in a bipartisan manner to solve the problems we face. The state of our union is strong, and we will continue to thrive as the greatest country in the world.”